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An un/familiar space: children and parents as collaborators in autoethnographic family research

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Sabine Little 
University of Sheffield, UK

Toby Little

University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

This paper, coauthored by mother and son (aged 10 at the time of writing, 12 at time of revisions), reports on the collaborative research experience during a 2.5-year-long autoethnographic study, which focused on bringing back the family heritage language after a 2-year break. Through a joint research diary, we regularly and rigorously chronicled both language-related conversations and our emotions linked to the process of bringing back the heritage language. Frustration, guilt, joy, exasperation, and pride were jointly discussed via what we call an un/familiar space. This paper explores the evolution of this space, linking it to Bhabha's third space theory and Gadamer's fusion of horizons. We present the un/familiar space both as an epistemological stance and as a methodological tool for intergenerational autoethnography, enabling both parents and children to engage with each other in a more neutral space, deliberately removed from traditional family roles. Further, we critically engage with the role of children as co-creators of knowledge within this space, contributing longitudinal data of co-construction and critical reflection from two generations to the research community.

Keywords

Autoethnography, third space, children as co-researchers, co-creation

Introduction

This paper reports on the methodological aspects of a 2.5-year-long autoethnographic study, which was initiated by Toby when he was 6 years old. After asking for a break from

Corresponding author:

Sabine Little, School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Rd, Sheffield S10 2GW, UK.

Email: s.little@sheffield.ac.uk

speaking and using German—the family heritage language of which Sabine was the only speaker at home—at the age of 4, Toby declared his ‘readiness’ to re-start German at age 6. At the time, Sabine was working with families to explore their use of the heritage language, and Toby asked whether we could ‘do research together’. He suggested a focus on his learning German again, after the 2-year-gap. Together, we decided on how we would gather data on the (very open) research question:

What happens when a parent and child work together to ‘resurrect’ the heritage language?

Our work together evolved through, and into, what we would like to call an un/familiar space. The term’s etymology is a joint one: Toby called it a ‘a space for thinking about our family, where we learn what we don’t know about each other’ (age 8.2, reflection), and Sabine mentioned the ethnographer’s adage of ‘making the familiar strange and the strange familiar’. Toby liked the word play of family/familiar, and together, we looked for a name that would describe a space that is both familiar and not-familiar: an un/familiar space.

Rather than focusing on the language-related aspects of the study, this paper will provide only a brief background of the study itself. We give some examples of our work practices, to enable to reader to understand the processes underlying the research. We then move on to explore the affordances of other space-related stances, specifically Bhabha’s ‘third space’ (1994) theory and Gadamer’s (1989) fusion of horizons. Specifically, we discuss their role in the evolution of the un/familiar space as a methodological and epistemological contribution to autoethnography and family research, focusing on the role of the child within this sphere.

A note on process: academic writing with a 10-year-old

We appreciate that it is unusual to read a coauthored paper which includes a minor, and so we seek to make our writing process as transparent as possible, to highlight issues around equity and voice. Singh Chawla (2015) queries both the time and intellectual contribution a person needs to make before they qualify as a coauthor. Since Toby had proposed the study himself, his desire to be involved in all processes, from ethical review to writing up, to presenting the research at conferences (Little and Little, 2019), was a guiding principle of our work. We knew that both our voices needed to be included as equitably as possible. While there is a precedent of academic journals publishing pupil-authored papers without academic literature (Blackawton et al., 2011), our context was different, based on a much longer and more intense collaboration, which allowed us to discuss terms and theories as and when they arose.

Therefore, while Sabine would do any background reading and explain complex or unknown terms to Toby, some of these topics were originally recognized and introduced by Toby, such as his belief that we should explore the space we had created for our family reflections. Our writing approach echoed the collaborative, equitable, and reflective practice that evolved throughout the study. At the beginning of our writing journey, over a 1-week holiday, we spent 60–90 minutes daily, discussing the various methodological aspects of our paper, often jumping about according to Toby’s thought processes. Some

exchanges we noted down verbatim, to add Toby's voice directly to the writing. For Toby's contributions, Sabine typed Toby's words as he spoke, with him reviewing and dictating changes. We further included certain short exchanges between us in the original dialogue format, to make transparent how we negotiated complex terminology and concepts, particularly around truth and validity. Both these practices developed during the writing process, and are presented in italics within the article to illustrate original authorship and voice. Other quotes from the research project (such as our reflective diary) are presented in traditional citation format. Following on from our discussions, Sabine wrote 'around' our exchanges, providing contextual literature, and introducing this literature to Toby through discussions and summaries. This process allowed us to continually check our mutual understanding of the work, and Toby to add further contributions, which are again in italics to highlight his voice.

A biographical note

Sabine was born in Germany, and moved to the UK in 1994, in order to pursue higher education, immediately after school. She has resided, studied, and worked in the UK ever since, with other family members (parents and sister) remaining in Germany. Following Sabine's marriage to a UK-born (non-German-speaking) partner in 2006, Toby was born in 2007. Although he attended part-time nursery from about 6 months of age, one day a week would be spent (speaking largely German) with Sabine, until school began at age 4. At this point, he asked for a 'break' from speaking German, which lasted 2 years, taking us to the starting point of the research. The time of the 'language hiatus' coincided with financial difficulties, limiting travel to Germany, and family circumstances meant that technological communication beyond phone calls was not possible.

The research process

Since this paper seeks to make a methodological contribution, we begin by outlining and explaining the data collection for the actual study, providing context for the evolution of our un/familiar space. Toby's insistence to be involved in all aspects of 'proper research' led to Sabine explaining that research with people would typically involve an ethics application, to ensure that people's rights were being respected. Filling in the application (going through the institution Sabine works for) was a first opportunity to explore and discuss the ways we envisaged our collaboration and data collection. We did not just want to share, but also to understand each other's experiences as much as possible, requiring us to clarify in which conditions this understanding would take place (Gadamer, 1989).

The study, at its core, aimed to explore how parent and child experience the reintroduction of the heritage language. Although the study was not intended to be purely linguistic (i.e. focusing on lexis, syntax, grammar, etc.), we still wanted to note down exchanges as verbatim as possible, for reasons of accuracy and rigor. We therefore kept an online research diary where we added exchanges as soon as possible, and as accurately as we remembered, after they happened. These exchanges were often written out 'on the fly', akin to Sanjek's (1990) notions of 'scratch notes', on a mobile phone in the car, on a napkin at a restaurant, or on a laptop at home. They were checked for accuracy

among those present, and transferred to the actual research diary as soon as possible. As Peltó (2013) states, some field notes may just be jottings, but should still be accurate, and include actual words or phrases. Therefore, although we did not originally envisage a methodological paper to come out of the study, we are confident that our notes are a fair representation of our exchanges, and that there was definite rigor to our approach and regularity of note-taking. Although entries were typically initiated for language-related reasons, there were distinctive, connected emotions, since 'noteworthiness' would imply them being out of the ordinary in either a positive or negative sense. Therefore, most entries were linked to emotions in some way, reflecting joy, frustration, anger, excitement, guilt, uncertainty, pride, and so on. Often, emotions entered into the equation from our ways of being with each other—that is, how we both reacted to mistakes and successes—showing us early on that emotions would play an important role in our work.

The concept of 'noteworthiness' is arguably related to the idea of critical incidents. As Tripp (1993: 8) points out, 'incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event'. This meant that our linguistic entries alone were not sufficient; we had to explore and reflect why we had chosen to add them to our diary, and whether we had experienced events in the same way. Ultimately, this introduced an early element of 'truth' into the research. Griffiths (2008) points out that critical incidents are perceived as 'true' by those involved, influencing subsequent behavior and action. In exploring and reflecting on our respective 'truths' surrounding a particular exchange (including the emotions we experienced), we created a space for the exploration of new contexts of meaning, embracing the idea that this construction would be an 'infinite process' (Gadamer, 1989: 298).

To facilitate this space, approximately 2 days after the original entry, we would return to the notes to explore two specific aspects—first, whether we had both experienced the exchange in the same way, and second, whether we could, when prompted, find the source of the feeling, and work with each other to resolve it. Since this exploration was typically twice-removed (both by time and by location) from the original exchange, the practice enabled us to utilize the notion of a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990, 1994) as a means to improve our collaboration in bringing Toby's German back. Our reflections were, again, noted down (typed by Sabine, as dictated by Toby), an approach we adopted over audio-recording due to the length and nature of the study (Jackson, 1990). Together, the original exchanges and subsequent reflections stretch to 83 typed pages, or 25,450 words.

For the language-related diary entries, codes linked to specific linguistic features were used, with additional codes linked to emotions and identity. For this paper, however, we wish to use the primary data in a different way, as a means to focus on our reflective experiences of the overall process, with occasional recourse to quotes from the original research diary and related reflections. In this way, we explore the evolution of the un/familiar space as a tool for family research, child-centered research, and autoethnography.

Examples of an un/familiar space

We chose to include some examples of from our research data, to show how our un/familiar space evolved and worked in practice, to ground the later

methodological discussion clearly within our experiences. Since Sabine was the person physically entering data into the diary, there are more immediate reflections available from her. The later discussion then typically began with re-visiting the exchange at a linguistic level, before Toby shared his emotions and views, leading to joint discussions and mutual exploration. Using our research diary, we got to know emotions underlying our actions, sharing insecurities, and finding ways to gently probe issues and aspects we feared might hurt the other.

Approximately 5 weeks into our attempts to bring German back into our lives, over the course of a single car journey (lasting about 45 minutes), Sabine found herself lapsing into English on three separate occasions, each related to a specific conversation with scientific content. On all three occasions, Sabine was the one giving up, flummoxed by complex explanations which she knew Toby would struggle to understand. Two days later, Sabine shared the following reflection about the incident with Toby:

The depth of conversations we have is amazing, and I love that you are looking to understand other people, contexts, etc. Trying to do that in German feels frustrating to me, and limiting - I feel like I am clipping your wings, even if you answer in English and I keep sticking to German. I am afraid of what deeper meanings you may miss out on, and I run to the language we both speak well. . . . even though I know that keeps you from learning German better, so that is probably clipping your wings, too, but in a different way.

Sabine, Reflection, August 2014

Toby took a different view; he remembered our exchange entirely as a language-related experience, not an emotional one, and his response to Sabine's reflection was:

It's okay if we switch sometimes, I know I said to always speak German, but if that's too hard, then we can switch back [to English]. I'll get better at German, and then, we can talk more in German.

Toby, Reflection, August 2014

In exchanges such as this, Toby was the one reassuring Sabine, who occasionally, and despite best intentions, fell into the trap of parental guilt highlighted in heritage language research (Okita, 2002), thinking that she should do more, be better in supporting German. It was meaningful that Toby understood her frustrations, and, mirroring Ellis' (2007) concept of relational ethics, we understood that such openness and emotional closeness was important for both the study itself, and for our family relationship. *It's okay when parents don't know everything, sometimes, you can talk about things and work them out together, and that might actually be more fun, because you are working with someone and you are doing it together. You can check things out along the way, and you'll both be happy when you succeed.* Creating a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) allowed us to begin to 'fuse our horizons' (Gadamer, 1989; Martineau, 2012) and gently lead each other toward a better understanding of how we related to language within the family.

Toby had issues with how well he perceived the study to have gone; in our discussions, he suggested that external readers might view our experiences as 'showy-offy',

and would learn more from our study if we had encountered more dissonance. Although our research diary was featuring moments of frustrations or impatience, these feelings had typically dissipated by the time we discussed our exchanges a couple of days later. Toby felt that we needed to make explicit in our writing the passage of time and space that led to the resolution of conflict, and the pre-conditions that would need to exist for the approach to be of benefit for other families and researchers. *In the family, everybody needs to trust each other, and listen to opinions and ideas. For us, that worked, because we already had that. If the family doesn't already have that, they would need to work at that. Parents need to talk to the child and always tell them the truth about their own feelings, even if the child doesn't like it. And children need to be able to do the same thing. In the beginning, we didn't ask each other straight away how we felt about something; we would write down what we said, and then talk about it later. Now, we just ask straight away. At the beginning, if you asked me why something makes me grumpy, that would just make me angrier. But now I'm older, and we are used to talking about how we feel. I think for younger children, it's better to wait a bit, so they can think about what to say. It takes a little while to work out how you feel about stuff. So, after you thought about it, you can talk about it, and it gives you their perspective, and then you can work it out together.*

Our notion of an un/familiar space links closely to Nøvik and Solem's (2003) understanding of closeness and distance simultaneously. We realized that the lack of truly frustrating exchanges was likely due to the distance we imposed between the original event and its discussion. Just 2 months into the project, we discussed what to do when Toby makes a mistake. He shared a complex mix of emotions:

It's really hard, because I really want to know how to say it right, and if you don't tell me, then I think I did it right, but I didn't, and then that's even worse. But when you tell me how to say it right, it still makes me angry and sad, because I got it wrong. It's like I want you to and I don't want you to [tell me], but I really want to get it right.

Toby Reflection, Research Diary, 6.9 years

Through our discussion, Sabine had a chance to explain that she was aware of Toby's frustration, and that she would prefer to simply model correct German, rather than to correct Toby's German, until errors would sort themselves out through sheer usage. At Toby's insistence, though, we developed two coping mechanisms for such situations, which appear frequently in our notes from that point onwards, with Toby guiding their implementation based on how he feels at the time.

Toby: *You have to know your child really well, so you know what they like, and then do what they like, to help correct them, but in a jokey way. I like playing with language, so that's a little bit easier for [Sabine] [. . .]. It's basically about staying friends.*

Sabine: *Some people might argue that it's not the parents' job to be the child's "friend" . . .*

Toby: *Well, first of all, it's the person that you've known most in your own life, and they're always near you (except when they're at work), and they're*

always there to help. That's not that different from a friend. When you work with what the child likes, you can have fun together, and not fight about the language.

Our family has three members, and while our way of working with each other created a shared space, access to this was not necessarily granted to Toby's father. Five months into the project, shortly before Toby's seventh birthday, he used the word 'Greeceland' in English conversation, causing his father to laugh. Toby got upset, interpreting the laughter as mockery, and explained that the mistake was due to a language mash-up, between 'Griechenland' ('Greece' in German) and 'Greece'. In reflecting on this a couple of days later, he explained 'you know that, Mummy, but Daddy doesn't, he's not like us, he doesn't know any languages' (Toby, Reflection, Research Diary, aged 6.12). Together, we discussed ways to ensure no immediate family member is excluded from the space we are creating, although, as we point out below, the amount of time we have spent discussing and reflecting has had a clear impact on our relationship.

Methodological reflections

In the following, we return to the literature to situate our experience within wider methodological considerations. We problematize the roles of parents and children in family research, and explore ethical and epistemological considerations around truth and validity, before situating our un/familiar space within the literature of third space theory (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Gadamer, 1989), exploring its affordances for the wider research community.

The roles of parent and child in family research

Studies in heritage language learning have a long history of being conducted and authored by parents. From the first documented diary study of a child's developing bilingualism (Ronjat, 1913) onwards, however, there appears to be a tacit assumption that the role of parent-researcher requires little methodological and ethical scrutiny. Children in these studies are informants, rather than becoming collaborators, with the notion of co-production typically not being discussed, although Tisdall (2017) argues that co-production may be the most promising, meaningful, and sustainable way to ensure children's views get accounted for beyond mere tokenism.

Mayall (2008) points out that parents collecting data may provide an 'enabling context', due to them being aware of background information, and having established trust, which is particularly important in a long-term study such as ours. Nøvik and Solem (2003: 263) argue that 'a good enough relationship [. . .] includes both closeness and distance', another spatial reference that spoke to us in the creation of our un/familiar space. For Toby, this meant that you *need a happy family, a family that can work together, and good ideas. If the parents are arguing about which language should be spoken, then it might be slightly harder, because the child might be worried about upsetting somebody*. Toby's words illustrate that, even when one parent is not directly involved in the study, a child's role should never be confused with 'taking sides' within the family.

Therefore, ethical responsibility toward children is paramount, whether they are participants or co-researchers (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015).

Relational ethics within the context of this study

While many autoethnographers focus on the study of the self, the ultimate focus lies in the study of culture (Winkler, 2018)—in our context, the family culture, inherently a relationship linked to specific ethical considerations. Ellis (2007: 4) talks about relational ethics as being particularly important in autoethnographic research, as a process that ‘recognises and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness’. Since autoethnographic research frequently focuses on some aspect of vulnerability (Behat, 1996; Ellis, 2004), but simultaneously links our lives to those that we live with, we must consider how relational ethics influence truth and secrecy. As Ellis (2007: 17) argues, ‘[s]eldom are we completely open with people in our lives about how we see them or how we see ourselves relative to them’. An understanding of how we, our views, attitudes, and actions, influence those around us is a vital aspect in relational ethics. In a parent–child relationship, these concerns are not uni-directional. *I think it’s important for children to understand that parents are people, too. Parents are parents, they are always there for you, make sure you get up, and everything is about you. But people are people, and they are interesting, and the more you learn about them, the more they teach you just by being there. Parents have thoughts, and often, they don’t tell the children their thoughts. So, as a child, you sometimes get told something and you don’t understand the thinking behind that. Talking about the thinking and the feeling helps both parents and children understand each other better.*

Ellis suggests that coauthoring an autoethnography among the various relevant participants may be a way forward to negotiate questionable or uncomfortable ethical concerns. However, she warns us to consider the stakes that various participants may have in the research, both now and in future. These concerns not only raise issues around informed consent and ethical awareness, but also a long-term understanding of what it means to be involved in an autoethnographic study, especially when one contributor is a minor. While it is impossible to know what the future holds, we both feel confident that our approach and ongoing discussions have addressed our own concerns. Toby struck one entry from the research diary, feeling it was too personal, and has multiple times edited or changed his own words in this paper, referring to clarity and impact. These actions, together with our discussions, make us feel as confident as we can be about our readiness to share the work. Sabine was aware of the scrutiny a paper with a child coauthor would attract, specifically a paper that explicitly discusses the ethics of this process. Some of our ethical concerns are apparent above, where we highlight Toby’s concerns that the study would be perceived as having gone too smoothly. His desire to add a section to this paper about family conditions shows the concern for taking the respect, dignity and connectedness Ellis advocates to the formal level of collaborative research.

Including the child as an active contributor to an autoethnography does therefore not erase ethical issues, and does not, in our opinion, make our study better or worse than autoethnographies where parents (Young, 2009) or children (Li, 1999; Ronjat, 1913; Slavkov, 2014) are written into the research as ‘silent partners’, it simply offers different

challenges. Willumsen et al. (2014: 342) rightly ask whether children can ‘handle’ the various criteria surrounding rigorous, ethical, and methodologically sound research, and what the ethical and moral implications of the research process are. They differentiate between research as an instigator of social change versus research with the aim to produce knowledge, with the former traditionally being more of interest to children, and the latter being more of interest to adults (Mayall, 2008). Taking a United Nations-informed approach, however, the focus is less on the child having a complete understanding of everything pertaining to a situation, but instead, to have enough of an understanding to form their own views (United Nations, 2009). Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) present six potential challenges to involving children as co-researchers, namely questions around research competence, training needs, the balance of insider/outsider perspectives, remuneration, power imbalances, and issues around child protection. While not all their concerns apply directly to our study, these challenges were instrumental in informing the way we worked together during the study, continually discussing and evaluating our needs and roles.

Children’s views in matters that involve them are particularly vital, as they have not yet adopted all the various conventions adults may be susceptible to (Milstein, 2010). The child’s sense of self-efficacy plays a considerable role in the way in which they feel able to contribute to the research process, and parents, naturally, have considerable influence on their child’s sense of self-efficacy. Wu (2008) points to two main parental traits linked to parental influence of their child’s ‘talent’, revolving around placing confidence in their children, and a sense of responsibility to nurture such ‘talent’. The talent in question for the purposes of this article is self-expression, necessitating the creation and maintenance of a space where the vulnerability can be explored ethically and safely. These concerns did form part of our discussions:

Sabine: *Were you ever worried about upsetting me?*

Toby: *No.*

Sabine: *Why?*

Toby: *Because I knew you would always listen to my ideas and try to do them.*

As Ellis (2007) highlights, we are seldom completely open with each other, so taking these discussions at face value would do a disservice to what our study tried to achieve, instead warranting further reflection. After all, a child’s ability to self-express may be tempered by wishing to please or appease the adult in their lives, making it necessary for us to spend a considerable time to explore notions of validity, truth, and rigor in relation to our respective positionalities.

Rigor, validity, truth, and positionality

Within our specific context, truth and validity require consideration from two perspectives—on the one hand, in terms of understanding whether the data are ‘true’ (and what this means in this context), and on the other, how validity influences the usefulness of the study in the wider academic sphere. The latter, since it correlates to many similar discussions around the usefulness of qualitative research, is comparatively easier to address. In our discussions linked to writing this article, Toby explained it thus:

Sabine: *So, why did you want to do the study?*

Toby: *I was curious. . . [long pause]*

Sabine: *About what?*

Toby: *. . . about how other bilingual children live, and about how my life was like theirs. So I thought finding out more about my life would help me understand others.*

Sabine: *Why do you think understanding one life can help you understand other lives?*

Toby: *Because other people can relate to that life.*

If the merit of a qualitative study rises and falls on its validity, Cypress (2017) argues that research practices must show consistency, transparency, and awareness of potential subjective influences and limitations. These themes are particularly worthy of exploration when one considers familial relationships present in the study. It was important for both of us to explore how our relationship (and Sabine's influence on Toby's upbringing) impacted on the data. Initially, Toby was quick to assign 'truth' to our data, confident that our affirmation would be enough: *I guess we don't have proof.* [puts on deep, funny voice] *This is Toby here, speaking, and it is true.* This became problematized when, during the writing of the article, we discussed what it meant that he was 'in control', instigating the study as a 6 year old.

Toby *But I was in control!*

Sabine: *Do you feel like you were in control?*

Toby: *Yes!*

Sabine: *Somebody else might argue that you are only saying that because I want you to. . .*

Toby: *. . . this is hard!*

This turned into a long discussion on how we know who is in control of our decisions, a topic we returned to numerous times:

Sabine: *How do you know your decisions are your decisions, and not the decisions we brought you up to make?*

Toby: [long pause] *Because you bring me up to be critical and question everything, and make my own choices.*

Sabine: *Do you ever make choices because you think we want you to make them?*

Toby: *Yes, like doing the laundry, but not about things like how to think.*

While the assumption that our views are innate and not subject to parental influences are obviously flawed, Toby's sense of control is mirrored in the research diary, in an exchange six months into the study:

Sabine: "Toby, bitte zieh' einen Pulli an, es ist kalt!" (Toby, please put on a jumper, it's cold)

Toby: "Ich möchte nicht!" (I don't want to!)

Sabine: "Dir wird kalt in der Schule, komm, es ist mein Job, auf dich aufzupassen!" (You'll get cold at school, come on, it's my job to look after you!)

Toby: “Und es ist mein Job zu sagen ja oder nein, zu was du sagst! Und ich möchte keinen Pulli. Ich bin nicht kalt!” (And it’s my job to say yes or no to what you say. And I don’t want a jumper. I’m not cold.)
Research diary, December 2014 (Toby age 7.1), incorrect German corrected in translation only

While the above exchange was noted down for the language aspect of the study, it illustrates Toby’s unwillingness to comply with requests he regards as pointless, and our endeavors to seek a compromise (in the incident in question, he packed the jumper in his bag, in case it was needed later).

The length of the study (2.5 years), plus the full period of reviewing data, writing, awaiting reviews, and engaging with them (3.5 years), have both facilitated and problematized the notion of validity. Triangulation is facilitated by exploring and adding to data at various points in time, including:

- (a) *initial data collection*, noting down exchanges (immediate or almost immediate, Toby aged 6.7–9.1),
- (b) *reflection* on data and noting down reflections (typically within a 48-hour period of original exchanges occurring),
- (c) *meta-reflection* on the full data (both (a) and (b), Toby aged 9.10–10.5) for the purposes of writing this paper, and
- (d) *further reflections* for revisions (Toby aged 11.7–12.6).

This practice arguably increases trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), although the triangulation in our case was not achieved by combining multiple research methods (Patton, 2002), and instead is more closely aligned with Healy and Perry’s (2000) realism paradigm, which uses triangulation of multiple data sources to create various perceptions of a particular study. In our case, this triangulation is temporal as well as spanning multiple data points. This allows us not only to revisit and challenge our perceptions, but also to track any changes in our views, and to re-examine comments and contributions from a developmental perspective. Unsurprisingly, Toby found that his ability to express himself grew as he aged. In our writing, while we treated entries from the research diary as data, leaving them unchanged, his writing for the paper underwent an editorial process, just like that of Sabine.

Personal narratives offer a shift, both in epistemology and methodology, toward a focus on lived experiences as a form of inquiry (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Problematizing the notion of trustworthiness is the fact Toby’s involvement in the study spans literally half his life. This makes the segregation of study and life impossible, especially since our use of the ‘un/familiar space’, that is, the notion of taking a step back, questioning origins of emotions, other people’s investment, and so on became part of family life. The question as to how his thoughts and comments were influenced by his upbringing is thus, on the one hand, a moot point, since no ‘control Toby’ is available to ascertain any parallel development. On the other hand, since we fully acknowledge that Toby’s (as well as Sabine’s) personality was shaped through our joint experience, this throws an interesting light on the notion of ‘positionality’, and to what extent (and at what

age) ‘influence’ becomes ‘positionality’. Carter et al. (2014) argue that dialogical storytelling helps us explore our positionality as a vital path toward the journey of understanding others. As we get older, the influences we are subjected to get amalgamated into the term ‘positionality’, as they broaden beyond parental upbringing. Nevertheless, in this study, we continually looked to problematize at what point children can be said to have their own ‘positionality’, rather than reducing their agency and self-efficacy by labelling them to be ‘influenced’. We cannot hope to finalize this discussion on the basis of a single study; however, our act of co-production opens up questions around the notion of child positionality in a family context. Moving from the considerations of truth, validity, rigor, and positionality to the development of our un/familiar space, we take from Gadamer (1989: 298) the understanding that the discovery of ‘true meaning’ is an infinite process. In the following, we explore our concept of an un/familiar space within the context of related theories aimed at overcoming distance between individuals.

Developing the un/familiar space

Hinted at throughout the paper, we explore our un/familiar space specifically from two perspectives: Bhabha’s third space theory and Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’. Both struck us for their use of space as a metaphorical distance that we seek to overcome when we wish to understand others’ perspectives, although we draw on other authors, and return to our previous considerations around ethics and the role of children as co-researchers, in order to give shape to our un/familiar space. In developing this section of the paper, we discussed whether there would be specific rules for our un/familiar space. However, Toby argued that there can’t be rules like ‘make your bed’, *because the un/familiar space theory is flexible, and it depends on the family, and so I guess flexibility is the rule*, akin to what Chesworth (2018: 851) describes as an ‘ethical responsiveness to uncertainty’. In recognition of this, we present, in the following, the underpinning characteristics of the un/familiar space.

Bhabha (1990, 1994) originally described third space theory as a conceptual space, where diverse cultures might meet. Such a space is not conceptually or intellectually linked to one particular culture, instead, it occupies space ‘in-between’, providing ‘the terrain for elaboration strategies of selfhood’ and ‘initiat[ing] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation’ (Bhabha, 1990, 1994: 2). For us, the concept of third spaces as meeting points was of relevance, as it linked to identity discovery through making explicit that which makes the contributors different, and that which unites them. The idea that each member of the third space ought to be recognized for their particular contributions was welcome in a study that sought to be as equitable as possible, recognizing funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) that stem from prior experiences. While the funds of knowledge approach is typically linked to research that seeks to highlight what knowledge/s children develop in their homes and bring to formal education settings, we believe that it may also be usefully employed to explore how members of the same family experience their life together. Part of this requires family members to acknowledge that these experiences are channeled and interpreted through the lens of particular roles (parent, child, etc.), *because*

it is good to look at things from children's perspectives, and maybe they look at things differently than parents. I guess it teaches the kids to listen to the parents' thoughts, too, and the other way round. I think you would have to know what the other person wants, and be able to merge both of your ideas together. This is easier said than done, and, as Martineau (2012) highlights, the misrecognition of identities can exacerbate the very inequalities and circumstances the effort seeks to ameliorate. *Therefore, you also have to be able to communicate, because you don't want to merge your ideas in the wrong way, so the other person doesn't feel listened to, because that wouldn't be our un/familiar space. You probably won't end up completely knowing the other person, but you can try to understand them.*

Gadamer's (1989) 'fusion of horizons' expresses the importance of context and history in our developing understanding of the world. Every interaction and experience is individually interpreted, leading to a personal point of view or 'horizon', with the possible consequence of 'pre-judgements' against experiences or views which do not correspond to our own. Rather than this closing off understanding, though, the 'fusion of horizons' encourages individuals to engage in ongoing dialogue, the purpose of which is not for one person to convince the other, but to mutually explore perceptions and interpretations. Gadamer's point that this dialogue never concludes, but is an 'infinite process', lends itself to family research. After 6 years of developing our un/familiar space, we would not say that we have understood each other, only that we have found ways to continually develop our understanding.

In seeking a successful un/familiar space, then, a core underpinning is based on the understanding that true recognition and 'knowledge' of each other is unlikely. Instead, the space utilizes Nøvik and Solem's (2003) notion of distance and closeness, and we argue that the recognition and discussion of emotions is an important component in order to engage in a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1989). Linking to relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), the un/familiar space acknowledges—and advocates the acknowledgment of—individual identities of all family members, encouraging children to take time to formulate, build, and express their views on all matters.

Gutiérrez et al. (1995) argue that a third space may not only be initiated by adults, but that children, too, can take initiative, although this may be viewed as anti-authoritarian behavior by those in power (e.g. teachers, parents). Where Gutiérrez et al. (1999) view third space as an explicit methodology to bridge school and home/community spaces, our third space was linked to exploring and understanding our roles as parent and child respectively, and particularly with view to the use of language in the family.

Fittingly for the purposes of our study, Bakhtin (1981: 360) talks about a hybridity in intergenerational migration research, which he refers to as

not only double-voiced and double-accented (as in rhetoric) but [. . .] also doublelanguaged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two individual consciousnesses, two voices, two accents, as there are two socio-linguistic consciousnesses, two epochs, [. . .] it is the collision between differing points of views on the world.

Bakhtin (1981: 360) further argues that this collision is necessary for it to hold the 'potential for new world views'. However, for Toby, *it depends on the relationship. If you've already been arguing, you'll carry on arguing before you get to that middle*

ground. But if you're already used to talking to each other, you can just work together and see where you end up. He also points out that people external to the study, but internal to the relationship, must not be neglected, *because Daddy doesn't mind that we speak German, even when he's around. If there is a parent that doesn't speak the other language, they need to be happy with people speaking another language.*

The ultimate underlying concern for our study was thus family happiness, rather than linguistic competence, a view which is not always shared by parents seeking to encourage the heritage language (Little, 2020). Bakhtin's (1981) use of the term 'collision' may be appropriate to illustrate the idea that disagreement may be necessary to challenge our understanding; however, as a use of a metaphor, we argue that this 'collision' may, over time and through the use of a third space, be reduced to a 'bump', by entering the exchange open-minded and aware of the other person involved.

Conclusions

Although the official data collection finished when Toby had just turned nine, we both have developed a way of 'stepping back' whenever a 'collision' (Bakhtin, 1981) threatens to occur, checking our emotions and seeking the other person's perspective. The third space has become a permanent fixture in the way we relate to each other. We suggest that the 'un/familiar space' makes an important contribution to the existing literature, as a tool for both research and family support work, with the caveat that all family members need to subscribe to it being a 'safe' space.

Early on in our research, Toby suggested that learning about our lives would help others to understand their own lives, and, indeed, other lives, inadvertently citing one of autoethnography's *raison d'être*. As somebody who typically works with other multilingual families, our study has given Sabine unique insights into facilitating parent-child communication, and first-hand experience of the struggle parents face in seeking to reverse or avert family language shift (Fishman, 1991). Within our family, it has created new pathways for communication, which have outlived the study itself, and which (while by no means a panacea to the difficulties of growing up, and being a grown-up, respectively) have opened our eyes to each other's perspectives. Moreover, though, it has affirmed and evidenced the opportunities that lie in foregrounding young children's experiences and voices in qualitative research.

It is undoubtedly impossible to set aside completely our traditional parent-child roles. Yet, our creation of an 'un/familiar space' has helped us both to question customary roles and reactions, and value each other's emotions and opinions—to engage in the ongoing, infinite process of our 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1989). We acknowledge that our relationship was uniquely formed over an extended period of time, but we argue that our work makes an important contribution to the role children play in research more generally. The 'un/familiar space' offers an opportunity to expand the field of child-centric research by formalizing time for reflection. We argue that, by treating family research as a holistic endeavor, and giving space for children's voices—not just in isolation, but in communication and reflection—we strengthen the power given to young research participants. We must ensure that we do not use the mantle of children's vulnerability as an excuse to not fully engage with their ability to show agency, control, and to hold opinions

from a young age. Working with children throughout the research process enables us to discover pathways of co-creation that make full use of each co-creator's unique skill set and experiences, ultimately enhancing quality and rigor in the research process.

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ORCID iD

Sabine Little  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9902-0217>

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Author biographies

Sabine Little is a Lecturer in Languages Education at the University of Sheffield. Her work focuses on issues around identity and belonging within the context of multilingualism, spanning both the home and the school context.

Toby Little is half German and half English. He is a school pupil in Sheffield. He hopes you enjoy our research paper.